

# **Big River bill on a fast track in the Senate**

**The Senate Finance Committee votes to approve 18 acres of the Big River open-space property for the proposed state police headquarters.**

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PROVIDENCE -- Despite strong objections from environmental groups and individual senators, the Senate went out of its way yesterday to move along the Carcieri administration's plans to build a new state police headquarters on Big River Reservoir land that was set aside for drinking water and open space.

Even though most legislation seems to take forever to pass, the Senate Finance Committee yesterday suspended its public-notice rules so it could hold a public hearing on a Big River bill less than 24 hours after it was introduced on the Senate floor.

The committee heard more than a dozen people, including two senators, argue against the bill that would exempt 18 acres of the 8,600-acre Big River property from an earlier state law protecting it all as open space. Then the committee approved the bill 4 to 2.

Earlier in the week, Jerome F. Williams, executive director of the Department of Administration, said his staff was revising a bill to submit next week. But the Senate policy office helped out by drafting the bill introduced Wednesday.

Last night, several senators went out of their way to promote the Big River site.

Committee chairman Stephen D. Alves, D-West Warwick, said, "I feel very confident that the administration and state police have done all they could to look for alternatives."

Sen. Leonidas P. Raptakis, D-Coventry, using maps and aerial photos, gave such a forceful presentation in favor of the project that administration officials said they didn't have much more to add. And Sen. Maryellen Goodwin, D-Providence, said she wanted to be listed as the bill's prime sponsor, but backed off in deference to Raptakis because he had so much local knowledge.

Opposing them were Sen. V. Susan Sosnowski, D-South Kingstown, and Sen. James C. Sheehan, D-North Kingstown.

Sosnowski said she heard from angry constituents all day. "Some didn't come because of the short notice," she said. "Some didn't want to testify against the state police."

Sosnowski said she was concerned about setting a precedent of developing preserved properties.

"I wonder if the taxpayers would have been so eager to pass bonds for a headquarters if they knew it was going on land set aside for drinking-water use," Sosnowski said. "I think this will have a chilling effect on future open-space bond issues."

Sheehan added: "This breaks faith with future generations, who count on open space being preserved."

Objections also were raised by Grow Smart Rhode Island, Save the Bay, the Sierra Club, Clean Water Action, and the Audubon Society of Rhode Island.

Aaron Frechette, editor of the Coventry Courier, objected that insufficient public notice of the hearing had been given. He said he was unaware until a half-hour before the scheduled beginning of 4:30 p.m. (The hearing didn't actually begin until hours later.)

Alves said he took offense. He said 18 people testified, proof that notice got out.

Raptakis said he would never have supported the site, just southwest of Route 95's Exit 7 in West Greenwich, if it had been taken from individuals. Raptakis said that the land had been a gravel operation before the state took it over.

Raptakis said locating the state police there would help reduce the dumping of garbage and illegal hunting in the area.

Col. Stephen Pare, superintendent of the state police, said he needed a headquarters near the highway that wasn't gridlocked. He said the previously considered site, near the state institutions in Cranston, was already "gridlocked" and bound to get worse.

He said he considered land in Quonset Point, but the state Economic Development Corporation can't free up a site large enough.

Williams testified that the state intended to replace the open-space land it uses by setting aside at least as much land elsewhere for open space.

Alves, Goodwin, Walter S. Felag Jr., D-Warren, and Hanna M. Gallo, D-Cranston, voted for the exemption. Senators June Gibbs, D-Middletown, and Frank A. Ciccone III, D-Providence, voted no.